Two-thirds of Americans now own a smart phone, so one might assume that the use of pagers is ancient history. However, pagers continue to remain popular within the healthcare industry. The total number of pagers currently in use is estimated to be between five and six million, with up to 3.5 million of those being used within hospitals. Some reports estimate that 90 percent of hospitals still use pagers.¹

A healthcare company recently learned that their pages had been inappropriately viewed by a member of the local community. Because the strength of the radio frequency pager signal is very strong, the signal can be monitored from an outside location. The monitoring equipment is fairly basic and easy to obtain, and only requires that the user have a good working knowledge of radio signals and equipment.
With the significantly improved technology of smartphones, why do hospitals continue to use pagers to communicate?²,³

Many may assume the persistent use of pagers within hospitals is simply due to physician resistance to change. While it may be somewhat true that physicians are slow to adapt to change, it turns out there are numerous valid reasons for the continued use of pagers:

- Pagers are small and easily carried within a pocket or on a belt.
- The battery power source for a pager typically is easily replaced with no recharging.
- Pagers are often more reliable than cell phones whose signals may not reach all areas of a hospital.
- Pagers are not impacted in the case of a natural disaster or other emergency when cell phone networks can become overwhelmed.
- Pagers are far less likely to be impacted by technical issues or general network outages.
- Pagers are less likely to be filled with information not critical to patient care making it easier to remain focused on key information.
- Pagers are far less expensive than other options that have been optimized for hospital use.
- Based on the above, many argue that patient safety is improved with the use of pagers.

Steps to Mitigate Risk and Impact of a Pager Privacy Breach

Fortunately, because pager messages are short, the risk of messages containing protected health information (PHI) content is small. If PHI is contained in a monitored message, it is doubtful that enough information would be included to result in patient harm. However, any breach must be taken seriously, and a full assessment conducted. The incident would likely require a report to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the agency which enforces HIPAA and HITECH. The OCR could see this as a problem deserving of an enforcement action.

Healthcare organizations need to be aware of this issue. Solutions such as encrypted pagers are available; however, they can be costly and can take a good deal of time to install system-wide. In the meantime, healthcare organizations should make sure their physicians and staff are aware of the privacy risks, and remind pager users to avoid including patient PHI in pager messages, whenever possible.

The OCR wants to see a culture of compliance with HIPAA’s security and privacy rules by covered healthcare entities and business associates. Therefore, if a healthcare provider takes proactive steps to protect PHI related to pager use, but a breach nevertheless happens, the provider’s documented efforts to address the problem could limit or prevent any fines from the OCR.

Although pagers are a relatively secure form of communication, taking proactive steps to protect health information communicated via pager will prevent breaches and could protect providers from harsh consequences from actions taken by the OCR in the event of a breach.

References

